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TAGS: [PREF](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: SYRIA UPDATE ON IRAQI REFUGEES

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.4 b/d

11. (U) Summary: PRM/ANE Office Director Richard Albright visited Damascus from June 12-15 and June 20-21, meeting about the Iraqi refugee crisis with interlocutors from a range of organizations, including: the Iraqi Embassy, the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Office for Migration, UNRWA, UNHCR, UNICEF, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, non-governmental organizations, and members of the diplomatic community. Topics included: urgent needs of Iraqis in Syria, ongoing efforts to help Iraqis in Syria including educational efforts, Palestinians from Iraq, and factors that complicate resettlement and humanitarian assistance efforts in Syria. There was no consensus on how many Iraqis were in Syria, with estimates ranging to up to two million persons. Albright was unable to visit the Al-Waleed camp on the Iraqi side of the Syria-Iraq border, which houses more than a thousand Palestinians from Iraq, because the Syrian MFA did not respond to a June 10 diplomatic note requesting permission for him to use that crossing. End Summary.

12. (C) IRAQI CHARGE D'AFFAIRES: PRM/ANE Office Director Richard Albright visited Damascus from June 12-15 and June 20-21, meeting about the Iraqi refugee crisis with interlocutors from a range of organizations. In a June 13 meeting at the Iraqi Embassy, new Iraqi Charge d'Affaires Hassan Sawedi Abdul al-Aziz noted Syria MFA comments indicating that they would not permit U.S. NGOs to operate freely in Syria for fear that NGO staff would "spy for the Americans." The Iraqi CDA urged USG officials in Baghdad to speak directly with the Iraqi PM and Minister of Education about the miserable living conditions for Iraqi refugees in Syria, especially for children, most of whom are out of school. "We have sent a lot of recommendations but never get a response," the Iraqi CDA said. Iraqi parents who do seek to enter their children in school must obtain the children's documents from their school and have them stamped by the Iraqi ministries of Education and Foreign Affairs and by the Syrian Embassy in Iraq. (Note: Newly arrived Iraqi First Secretary Mayad Abdullah, who served as a notetaker for the

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meeting, said that she had yet to obtain the documents to put her children in Syrian schools. End Note.) The Iraqi Embassy expects an exodus of Iraqis from Baghdad after the end of Iraq's school year, and many Iraqis may never return, the CDA said. There have been reports that in response the

SARG recently implemented a new summer visa policy for arriving Iraqis, granting a one-month entry visa followed by a one-month extension. Iraqis would have to depart Syria but could reenter almost immediately, the CDA said. (Note: Other sources could not confirm this report. End Note.)

13. (C) ICRC REPRESENTATIVE: In a June 13 meeting, ICRC Representative Jean Jacques Fresard underscored the terrible living conditions of Iraq Palestinians at the Al-Waleed camp on the Iraq side of the Syria-Iraq southeastern border crossing of Tanef/Waleed. In the past three weeks, 120 new Iraqi Palestinian arrivals have boosted the camp's population to 1040 persons, Fresard said. The camp is located near a small Iraqi village comprising "a few thousand inhabitants" who live off traffic at the border crossing. There are reports that the Iraqi government may reopen the Al-Bukamal/Qa'im crossing with Syria in July of this year, in which case, ICRC would investigate the option of moving the Al-Waleed population north to al-Qa'im, which offers a more urban environment, Fresard said. (Note: Albright was unable to visit the Al-Waleed camp on the Iraqi side of the Syria-Iraq border, which houses more than a thousand Iraq Palestinians, because the Syrian MFA refused to respond to a June 10 diplomatic note requesting permission for him to use that crossing. End Note.)

14. (C) Regarding the more than 300 Iraqi Palestinians in the al-Tanef camp on the Syria side of the Tanef/Waleed crossing, there are unconfirmed reports that the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) convinced the SARG to allow several men travel via Syria to Lebanon for training, Fresard said. On the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, Fresard described it as a small, top-heavy organization with little depth to its capacity but with increasing funds. With the increased international focus on Iraqi refugees here, the SARG has received significant funding for an organization its size, including: USD 3.7 million from UNHCR and 1.5 million euros from the European Commission through the Dutch Red Cross. The Syrian government is reluctant to vet large international organizations for work in Syria, suspecting that they are serving as conduits for spies from "Zionist organizations," he added. SARG officials are frightened that they will be held responsible by Syrian authorities for any security slips.

15. (C) UNICEF: In a June 14 meeting with UNICEF Director Anis Salem and his deputy Marc Lucet, the officials outlined a new campaign they are undertaking in collaboration with the Syrian Ministry of Education to get 100,000 Iraqi schoolchildren in Syria back to school this fall. UNICEF was currently planning to contribute USD 500,000 to this effort out its emergency fund, as no pledges had yet come in for the USD 2.5 million Syria portion of its recent USD 41 million appeal for Iraq programs. UNICEF estimates that of the more than 280,000 Iraqi children in Syria, only an estimated 36,000 are in public and private schools. (Note: The Minister of Interior has publicly stated that 34,000 Iraqi children were enrolled in Syrian public schools this year, while separately the Minister of Education has told UNICEF that all private schools in the Damascus area offer no more than 2,000 seats total. End Note.) When Albright indicated reported Syrian willingness to permit the establishment of parallel Iraqi schools here, Salem and Lucet expressed surprise, saying they have not heard similar expressions of willingness and that such schools would create fear about a long-term parallel system and about the possibility of a pull-effect of more refugees from Iraq. They also questioned who would have the capacity to run the schools.

16. (C) UNRWA: In a June 14 meeting at UNRWA's Damascus office, Field Director Panos Moumtzis said that so far 2,500 Iraq Palestinians have made their way to Syria on false Iraqi passports and registered with UNRWA, including 500 Iraq Palestinian children who are enrolled in UNRWA schools. UNRWA provides these Iraq Palestinians an identification card identical to that of Syria Palestinians and permits them access to UNRWA clinics. Moumtzis added he has discreetly shared information about the arrival of Iraq Palestinians and

their access to UNRWA services in one-on-one meetings with Syrian officials, who have made it clear that the matter must remain quiet, given Syria's policy of denying entry to additional Iraq Palestinians. In the event that more of Iraq's Palestinian population is able to obtain Iraqi documents, UNRWA-Damascus expects the number of requests for assistance may increase dramatically, requiring additional funding to pay for education, health care and housing, Moutzsis said. UNRWA is working with UNHCR to obtain funding for the Iraqi Palestinians. Currently, UNRWA is planning for 5,000 new arrivals this summer, Moutzsis said. As an aside, UNRWA's director noted that some 350 Iraq Palestinians have made their way to New Delhi, possibly through Armenia with the assistance of human smugglers.

17. (C) LIFE for Relief and Development: In a June 14 meeting at the Syria office of Life, Regional Director Anwar Quassem and one of the organization's DC-based founders Muthanna Hanooti said that:

--LIFE has functioned in Syria since 2003. To get permission, it worked (in order) through the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and finally through the Prime Minister, who signed the authorization letter. The organization's headquarters is in Michigan.

--The organization is involved in a number of humanitarian assistance projects which it coordinates under the umbrella of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC).

--Life plans to implement PRM's recently funded proposal submitted by CARE. To do so, it will need 25 staff and volunteers, who will base their operations out of the Jaramana suburb of Damascus.

--Hanooti noted at the end of the meeting that he currently works in DC as a consultant for Iraqi Vice President Tariq Al Hashemi.

18. (C) IMC: In a June 13 meeting with International Medical Corps (IMC) officials, Director of Emergency Response Edi Cosic said he sensed that the Red Crescent may not have fully grasped the urgency of the situation of Iraqis in Syria. For example, the Red Crescent had yet to give IMC permission to go to the field, address the issue of office space for the IMC and other NGOs, or follow-up with the Ministry of the Interior regarding IMC's registration as a legal entity in Syria. IMC's objective was to provide health sector support that was similar to that provided by the Red Crescent, with a focus on providing additional capacity to service Iraqis. IMC hopes to build new clinics or support existing clinics in the fields of primary health, paternal care and community outreach, hopefully staffed with Iraqis, as most Syrian physicians are already over employed.

19. (C) ICMC: In a June 13 meeting at the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) office in Damascus, ICMC Technical Advisor Osama al-Muhammad, Caritas-Damascus Project Officer Roula Chahine and Caritas-Damascus Financial Director Shadi Fadel gave an overview of the ICMC-funded Caritas project in Damascus as well as a general idea of the Iraqi refugee situation in Damascus. As one of ICMC's implementing partners Caritas was in perhaps the best position to describe some of the every day problems facing Iraqi refugees. Caritas works in the Jaramana district of Damascus, which hosts almost exclusively Christian Iraqi refugees. The population of Jaramana has increased ten-fold since the beginning of the war in Iraq; going from a pre-war low of about 20,000 to the current high of 200,000. First, Chahine, Fadel, and Muhammad gave an overall description of the myriad problems facing Iraqi refugees, which, according to Muhammad, is particularly acute in Damascus where 70-80 percent of all refugees live. Refugees cannot work, have difficulty enrolling Iraqi children in Syrian schools, and face psychological and emotional problems as a result of the war. Then, both Chahine and Fadel described some of the types of projects Caritas performs. Caritas initially interviews any Iraqi who comes to their office to determine their needs. To

date, Caritas has approximately 4,500 cases on file. Afterwards, Caritas determines the accuracy of the need and provides assistance if deemed necessary. Caritas routinely provides food, clothing, blankets, vouchers for government-run supply stores, and hospital referrals. It also supports education for refugee children by providing uniforms, books, and school transportation. In a June 20 meeting, Caritas officials told Albright that the organization was satisfied with its cooperation with ICMC. Caritas expressed appreciation for PRM funding for CRS's project, which would serve different neighborhoods and clientele than ICMC.

¶10. (C) In a June 20 meeting at the Syrian Arab Red Crescent's new headquarters, in the Al-Asad suburb of Damascus, Red Crescent Chairman Dr. Abdul Rahman Attar said that:

--The organization was seeking to create a kindergarten and summer school for Iraqis using Iraqi teachers. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) was also trying to set up a nursing school for 40-60 nursing students, as there is a great need in new clinics and hospitals for professional staff. (Attar did not provide details on these efforts.)

--Over the past several months, the Syrian government had authorized several international NGOs to work in Syria, with the stipulation that they coordinate their efforts through the SARC. These NGOs would be required to set up joint bank accounts with the SARC, with signatures from both sides needed for financial transactions. Most of these organizations, including the International Medical Corps (IMC), were slow in getting their projects up and running. When Albright indicated that IMC was anxious to get to work, Attar instructed his deputy Marwan Abdullah to get in touch with Syria-based IMC staff.

--The SARC has 10,000 volunteers in Syria. Some of those volunteers are being recruited for training and coordination of NGO efforts here.

--The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies had only received a small portion of its Iraq-related appeal launched earlier this year.

--Attar would not support efforts by the Iraq Red Crescent to launch operations in Syria, as this violated the rules of the Red Cross movement. Moreover, he commented that Iraq Red Crescent Society VP Jamal Karbouli owned expensive residential property in Syria, raising questions about the sources of his income. Nevertheless, the Iraq Red Crescent was welcome to coordinate its efforts through the SARC, which was "small but efficient."

--Attar planned to be in Washington July 18-19 for meetings of the American-Arab Chamber of Commerce.

¶11. (C) In a June 20 meeting, UNHCR Representative Laurens Jolles said that:

--UNHCR and UNICEF have been meeting with the Ministry of Education (MOE), which has indicated its willingness to launch a joint campaign to get 100,000 Iraqi kids into Syrian public schools this fall. The SARG had agreed to launch the awareness-raising campaign for this effort on June 20, with a public announcement by the Minister of Education at an event hosted by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent. (Jolles did not think, however, that the announcement had occurred.)

--The MOE was supposed to come back soon with requirements and a proposed budget for the initiative. The UN agencies had proposed the hiring of Iraqi teachers to supplement staff in Syrian schools. The MOE indicated that a request for 5,000 new teachers had resulted in 30,000 Syrian applicants.

--The MOE has agreed to build six new schools with UNHCR funding, including at least three that will be ready for the upcoming school year. To accommodate the expected influx of

Iraqi students, UNHCR/UNICEF/the MOE are considering a double-shift system.

--Impediments to Iraqi children's entry into Syrian schools include: parents, lack of awareness that this was possible; schools not accepting students who did not possess certified education documents from Iraq; the burden on children to help support their families financially. UNHCR is considering possible solutions to ensure higher enrollment among Iraqis, including providing financial incentives, which would be expensive. For example proving 10,000 Iraqi students with USD 100 a month would cost USD 1 million.

--On NGOs, within past months the Syrian government has approved a handful of international organizations to begin work in Syria, but the Syrian Arab Red Crescent has yet to give them final permission to work. This suggests that permissions may still be under review by the security services. Church organizations, such as ICMC and Caritas, function here, but carefully and with limitations.

--In response to a question about UNHCR's program strategy, Jolles promised to get a formal document outlining the office's plans to PRM. As a result of strong support for the January 2007 Appeal, UNHCR Syria had already received USD 15 million, and expected that that figure would will increase this year to USD 33 million with funds from UNHCR's second appeal in July.

12. (U) PRM/ANE Office Director Albright cleared on this cable.
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